

The Bloomfield Record.

AUNT CHARLOTTE'S STORY.

"Now, Ida, my dear girl, take my advice," said Aunt Charlotte to her giddy young niece "and don't imperil your own future happiness nor be guilty of injustice by slighting the man to whom you have given your troth or by foolishly teasing him in order to test his affection. There is a story in my own memory that I have never told you; and I could not now bring myself to do so only that I see you don't like me to lecture you, and I wish you to learn wisdom by an easier method than that of bitter experience."

"When I was a young girl we lived, as you know, in Canada, in one of the small lake-shore towns between Toronto and Kingston. Your grandfather was a man of note in the town, and I was a good deal sought after. I was giddy, too, and selfish, though I did not then consider myself so. I had many admirers and suitors, among whom the one I liked best was Harry Vane. From my very infancy Harry had been my gallant, and though I sometimes pretended to be, and sometimes really was, jealous of him or otherwise offended, and he the same with regard to me, we always made up again and were better friends than ever. There was not really any engagement between us, though Harry had asked me to form one; but my parents objected to long engagements, and we were not ready to marry. Matters stood thus when, early on spring, we had an addition to our list of beauties in the form of a dashing young fellow, an Englishman, sent out by a wealthy firm of the mother country for the purpose of establishing an agency in their line of business. His headquarters had been in Montreal, but he now announced his intention of making our town his home during the summer.

"He had a good deal of leisure, and spent an inconsiderable part of it at our house or promenading the streets with me. I could scarcely set my feet on the sidewalk without encountering him. His name was Bowns, and he claimed to be of aristocratic parentage. He was handsome and affable, though rather imperious, with very distinguishing appearance; so no wonder the girls of our set wished to attract his attention, and were envious of me. Of course I was proud of my conquest, and perhaps carried myself a little haughtily in consequence. For some time Harry pouted, then openly remonstrated, even pleaded; but as I angrily asserted my independence, he finally desisted from all apparent notice of the matter; and when ever we met he treated me with indifferent courtesy, and altogether showed a manly self-command which I did not fail to note and admire. Still I must confess that at that time I gave very little thought to Harry or to any of my old admirers; it seems wonderful to me how completely I was fascinated by the prepossessing stranger.

"To be sure he flattered my vanity not a little, and my empty head was turned by his lavish, adulstrial style of compliments. He raved about my eyes of heavenly blue, the golden glory of my mermaid locks, my swan-like neck, and aunless flow of pathos that ought to have disgusted me, but did not; and so I listened and heanted. About the middle of August we made up among our set a picnic party to drive out to Rice Lake Plains and spend the day in boating on the lake, gathering huckleberries, wild flowers, &c., and generally amusing ourselves.

"You must know that there is an irregular chain of small lakes extending transversely from the Bay of Quinte, near the eastern end of Lake Ontario, to the eastern end of Superior. Rice Lake is the first of the chain counting from Ontario, and it lies at a distance of from two to four hours' drive from several small towns on the frontier. We had an early breakfast, and set off at eight o'clock, so that we need not be on the road during the heat of the day. There were several carriages; the one in which I rode was a handsome barouche hired from a livery stable for the occasion, and by my side the all-conquering Mr. Bowns.

"For some unexplained reason Harry Vane did not go in any of the carriages, but was mounted on horseback, and he rode gaily by the side of first one vehicle, then another. When we had gone a little distance out of town the country air, sights and sounds were so exhilarating that we in our carriage began to sing. Harry, hearing us, rode up and joined in the song, he being particularly fond of singing. Shortly we struck off into an old ditch which he and I had sung together countless times when we were each first in the esteem of the other and no grey stranger between us. For a stanza or two Harry sang bravely, but when we came to the refrain suddenly his horse bolted and he rode off, catching at his hat with one hand and seeming to draw rein with the other. The remainder of the party thought his horse had shied and run away with him, but I saw thoroughly the whole manoeuvre, and a sudden pang shot through my selfish heart.

"On reaching the lake at the point agreed upon, we separated into little companies, and wandered about at will, but keeping within the vicinity of the camp until the horn sounded for dinner. We were all, as is usual at picnics, in hungry mood, and we did not dine mincingly.

"After dinner we lolled about on the grass for while, then formed plans for the afternoon's campaign. There were near by several canoes or row-boats, that were kept for hire, and a fair proportion of our band decided in favor of an excursion on the lake, some parties going in one direction, some in another. The boats would accommodate

only four persons each, the rowers and two others. Three boatloads, twelve individuals in all, determined to pay a visit to the tower on the opposite shore of the lake, and about three miles further up. As we divided ourselves into parties of four I felt an irrepressible desire to have Harry Vane, who had declared for the tower in our boat, so I called out:

"Harry, you are coming with us? meaning by us, Bowns and myself."

"I shall never forget the look of mingled pain and pleasure with which he replied: 'No, Charlotte; George Law is quartered in your boat.'

"It was half-past three o'clock when we landed near the tower and drew the boats up on beach. This tower was an octagon building three or four stories in height, consisting of only one room to each story, with a narrow spiral staircase leading from base to summit. At the top was an observatory not much larger than a good-sized bird-cage, which had once been furnished with a small telescope mounted on a swivel, but was now reduced to a very common-place spy-glass. The basement was a deep, dungeon-like hole, with a grated door through which one entered a subterranean passage leading out to the shore of the lake. This tower, with its lean-to kitchen or, rather, cook-house, was built on a hill at the distance of about two hundred yards from the water's edge, and it was the product of a Quixotic Englishman, an old bachelor's fancy. The whimsical man did not carry out his original intention of making a complete miniature castle of the feudal times, but suddenly abandoned the enterprise and went as he came, nobody knew whither. This odd little tower had been surrounded on all sides, save the deep bank next the water, by a diminutive moat, which was now a dry ditch filled with weeds and wild flowers: there, too, was the wreck of a toy-like drawbridge, and within the enclosure were several quaint-looking garden-chairs cut into the stumps of trees. There was a family residing in the house, at least they made it an occasional residence during the summer, but that day they were absent, and the garrulous old servant in charge showed us over the premises. We strolled down by the light of a lantern through the underground passage to the opening on the lake; we climbed the steep stairs and peeped through the old spy-glass; sat in the grotesque chairs, and gathered bouquets from the quondam moat. All these vagaries consumed so much time that, before we were aware, the sun was going down the westward slope in a way that, when we noticed it, sent us to our boats with speed. We were soon gliding over the water in jovial spirits and at a fair rate of motion toward the camping place on the shore next home. The three boats kept near together, and as we went we sang Tom Moore's Canadian boat song. Just as our voices were ringing out:

"Boys, brothers, row, for the stream runs fast."

The rapids are near and the daylight is passed!"

A sudden breeze almost took the light umbrella with which I was screening myself and companion from sun and wind (we had left our bonnets at the camp) out of my hand. The breeze subsided for a moment, then came again more vigorously than before, and held on steadily. Generally or frequently a stiff breeze rises on those lakes about so soon after sunset; but now the sun was certainly half an hour high. Sudden squalls, especially when thunder clouds are hovering near, accompanied by dangerous disturbance of the water, are unpleasantly the concomitants of boating on those shallow lakes.

"Looking around the horizon we discovered the cause of the suddenly rising wind. A heavy pile of black clouds coming up behind us in the northwest were spreading themselves along the northern horizon and extending upward almost to the zenith; and at the same time we began to hear the thunder mutter and see the lightning play, though not very near. The weather-wise ones of our party said the shower was spending its north of us, but we might get a sprinkling from its skirts, and the wind was sure to be troublesome.

"Meanwhile we had crossed the lake and were making our way down to the landing adjoining, which was our camp, keeping close in shore to avoid the commotion of the water.

"There is a peculiarity in that lake. The wild rice, from which it takes its name, grows over almost the entire bottom of the basin, and when at its tallest the grain lies floating on the surface of the water, and the Indians, when it is ripe, paddle round and gather it into their canoes. This, however, makes navigation to ordinary rowers rather difficult; and when the basin is particularly shallow or when the waters are agitated by storms the passage is perils.

"I soon perceived that Bowns and George Law were by no means masters of the situation; and, oh, how I longed for the tried and trusty arm of Harry Vane, to steer our giddy little skiff! Just then Harry, who was ahead, called out to us to make for an islet, a little way out in the lake, on one side of which there was not much rice, and which had been used by the Indians as a landing place, as it sloped gradually into the water; he said we had better land on the main shore, rowed out, and said we had better pass over.

"The rowers turned the boat around, I meant holding the umbrella low like a tent of awning over my own and Nellie Morton's heads, for now it was raining. Again Harry called us to shut down the umbrella, lest it should catch the wind and upset our skill, and the next moment, Bowns, who had not said one word to us girls since the wind sprung up, snapped out, 'Yes, cer-

tainly, down with that umbrella!'

"What with a sense of danger, and what with sudden consternation at being spoken to in such a tone and manner, I had no self-command, and in shutting the umbrella I somehow lost my balance, and the next instant I was sinking in the blinding water.

"I must have risen very quickly, for the boat was there and I laid my hand on its side, but quick as a flash Bowns's hand came down on mine, and though he afterward said that he tried to lay hold of me to assist me, I know that he disengaged my hand. True, I should have upset the boat, and just as true he flung me off to perish. As I sank again, even through the gurgling in my ears, I heard the voice of Harry Vane, 'Courage, Charlotte, I'm coming.'

"Again I rose and again sank. Then I ceased to struggle and the pain of suffocation was gone. I knew that I was dying, and like electricity all my past life flashed before me. I had no terror of death, but I longed to ask Harry's pardon. Bowns I seemed to have forgotten. The tall ruse was all about me, and I knew no more until a deadly sickness and great pain woke me to consciousness. Was it the gurgling water or human speech that rumbled in my ears? I did not know, I did not care; I only wished not to be disturbed—not to suffer.

"Slowly my comprehension returned and I found myself on a bed in the log-cabin of the man who kept the boats on hire, and it was night, for candles were burning. Some of my companions of the picnic were there, but I was too ill and weary to ask questions.

"When next I opened my eyes it was daylight and my father and mother were bending over me.

"Suddenly I remembered something of the drowning and I cried out, 'Where is Harry? He said he was coming.'

"They hushed and soothed me and I supposed administered a narcotic, for I have only a faint recollection of lying on a bed in a covered conveyance and of being annoyed by the jolting.

"The next time I awoke my mind was clear. I recollect all, and begged to be told how I was saved. My friends evaded this question, and my suspicions being aroused I demanded to see Harry Vane. Finding they could no longer put me off, they told me that Harry rescued me and swam with me toward the islet, where one of the boats had just landed. Another gentleman waded out breast high to meet him, and drew me to the shore, supposing that Harry was following. But Harry did not follow, and in the excitement about me he was not missed until too late. Whether he was exhausted or whether he took a cramp no one could tell. This only I know and never shall forget: Harry Vane was drowned in saving my life. This also I know: I shall live and die Charlotte Kemp. As for Bowns, I hated 'em. He had the sound of his name. He left our town almost immediately after the occurrence; and I never saw his face after the day of the picnic."

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